

The Fourth Church Pulpit

HAPPY ARE THOSE...

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FOURTH
PRESBY
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Scripture
Luke 6:17-26

**"Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord."
Jeremiah 17:7 (NRSV)**

Sometimes you hear a word from the Lord in a strange and unexpected place. I heard a word this week in *The Popcorn Report*.

I was at a retreat for Pastors on the Church in the world of the future — and some of the material we talked about was from something called *The Popcorn Report* ... not the stuff you buy at the movie theater. Faith Popcorn is the name of the author, and she is a market researcher. A lot of blue chip companies are paying her a lot of money to tell them what you and I are going to be willing to buy in the future. I couldn't resist. So I hurried home from the retreat and bought the book and, on page 17, I began to hear a word from the Lord ... a word peculiarly relevant I thought to the text I was beginning to study for this sermon. But, first, the word according to Faith Popcorn.

"It's 2010.

"Try to open your door and you can't because there's too much garbage piled up outside. While you once spent 10% of your salary to buy nonessential items, now it costs about 10% more of your salary to get rid of these nonessentials. You'll know who has money and who doesn't by who gets his or her garbage picked up. The newly rich of 2010 will have made their money not by creating new products, but by making garbage go away — the garbage barons."

Like Jesus, in Luke 6, Faith Popcorn sets up dramatic contrasts. There is an alternative to garbage ...

"We will adopt a consume/replenish approach to living. Consumers and corporations alike will have learned that production and consumption aren't the end of the line. The cycle ends with replenishing, giving back."

The word from the Lord continued...

"It's 2010.

"More and more systems are breaking down. The pileup of toxic waste has gotten worse. The air is so bad you're only allowed to drive your car three days a week — which is all you can afford to drive anyway because filling the tank costs eighty dollars.

Or:

"Living within our means and resources, we're slowly healing the planet."

The word continued ...

"It's 2010. An armed guard picks up your children at school. The streets are an arena of drugs and crime, ruled by those who were never educated to participate in the world in any responsible way.

Or:

"Much has been done to alleviate conditions: Every corporation does more to educate, employ, and provide for the disadvantaged."

It's a little melodramatic and simplistic, and every time I read a book like that I'm aware that I'd have to carry it into the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in a brown paper wrapper. And, yet, Faith Popcorn's

melodramatic predictions with their radical contrasts are arguably fairly bland compared to something Jesus said one day, near the beginning of his ministry. They also, I submit, are actually social commentary on the relevance of those words.

"Blessed are you who are poor;
Blessed are you who are hungry;
Blessed are you who weep;
Blessed are you when people hate you;
and
Woe to you who are rich;
Woe to you who are full now;
Woe to you who are laughing;
Woe to you when all speak well of you."

They're Luke's version of the Beatitudes ... which appear in Matthew 5 and which we know and love: know and love so much that we don't always hear what they say ...

As a matter of fact, if you read them literally, Jesus' statements are outrageous. If you know anything about poverty or hunger or grief, how in God's name can you call that blessed? To make matters more complicated, the scholars tell us that the word translated "blessed" here does not mean a kind of sanctimonious piety. Blessedness here really means happiness, a deeply, satisfied, almost aesthetic happiness. C.S. Lewis thought it means beautiful, delightful, delectable. Happy are you who are poor. One translator renders it "How fortunate." The Jerusalem Bible says "How happy." Another translation "Ah, the happiness of." I like that best - the sigh of emotion which is more profound than words with which to describe it ... "Ah, the happiness of ..."

Think about the internal contrast —

Happy are you who are poor - woe to the rich;
Happy are you who are hungry - woe to the full;
Happy are you who are weeping - woe to the laughing;
Happy are you who are rejected - woe to the accepted, the celebrated, the VIP.

The simple fact is that if you add the columns: rich plus full plus laughing plus accepted, the sum is happiness in Jesus's culture. And ours. And if you add the other column: poor, plus hungry plus weeping plus rejection, the sum is unhappiness in his culture and ours.

What in the world did Jesus mean? I promised myself that I would not mention "The Trial" from the pulpit. I'm breaking my promise because among the sobering lessons it is teaching us about ourselves — none of which I find very appealing, frankly — is that wealth, good times, a life affluent enough to afford the pursuit of pleasure on a full-time basis, lots of laughs and public affection — does not, in the long run, or even the short run, automatically add up to happiness.

It is not a lesson we learn easily. We work. We work very hard to succeed and to earn for ourselves not only the monetary compensation but also community affection, respect, regard, but it doesn't always work ... i.e. our commitment may produce affluence — but not happiness.

Parker Palmer, who will be here the first weekend in March to lead a Lenten Workshop and to preach, writes in his book *The Active Life* -

"Many of us know what it is to live lives not of action but of frenzy, to go from day to day exhausted and unfulfilled." [p. 10]

Stephen Covey, whose *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* is another bestseller I'd have to take in secret into Swift Hall in a brown paper wrapper, creates an eloquent picture of many of us.

"It's easy to get caught up in the activity trap, with the busyness of life, to work harder, and harder at climbing the ladder of success only to discover that it's leaning against the wrong wall." [p.98]

The result is not only a lifestyle that does not make good on its promise, does not, in fact, produce happiness at the end of the day, but also a whole culture, built on the same assumptions, a culture which encourages, urges, and compels all of us to commit to the ideology of consumerism as a way to achieve happiness.

We can't get away from it. And along the way we have not only become the richest and most productive system the world has ever known, we are creating an economic imbalance that looks like a nightmare from the point of view of our grandchildren who will have to deal with the political implications. We are 6% of the world's population and we consume 30% of the world's resources. That is a finite ratio — a day of reckoning will come.

The economists and social scientists know it. Faith Popcorn's positive scenarios are based on a massive change of heart ... no longer consume and discard, but consume and replenish: no long consume and pollute ... but consume and restore/heal: no longer produce, market, sell, expand, produce — but educate, care for, provide for ...

This is not a preacher's solution — but a market researcher ...

But it's the spiritual, the deeply personal dimension, that is in focus for us. Did you see the cartoon on the editorial page of the *New York Times* two weeks ago? Its title was "Entertainment Tonight," and it was a biting homily on the religion of consumerism.

"Yo," she says, "let's go consume some fossil fuel!"

"Sure thing," he answers, "as long as we consume food, too."

"I consumed a magazine today."

"A TV show I consumed today suggested a film we should consume."

"I'd like to consume clothes like that actress consumes," she says after the movie.

Later, in bed, she says plaintively, "I still feel empty."

He says, "Be quiet and consume some sleep."

Evelyn Underhill, British theologian in the last generation, observed that we spend most of our lives conjugating three verbs, "to want, to have, and to do. Craving, clutching, and fussing ... We are kept in perpetual unrest, forgetting that none of these verbs has any ultimate significance." Happiness, Underhill wrote, is an experience given to us when we are centered and when our whole life grows out of that place where we anchor ourselves to something ultimate: to God. [see *Weavings*, July/August, 1994, from *The Spiritual Life*]

What does it do for you? What makes you happy? Not a bad idea to take inventory every now and then and identify what produces happiness for you.

Someone said happiness is when your last child leaves home for good, and the dog dies.

Newsweek magazine did a feature on happiness a while ago and cited research done by psychologists at the University of Illinois. What comes consistently to the top of the chart (when people are asked what makes them happy) is not what we expect: success, youth, wealth, good looks; the clear evidence is relationships. Close ones. Next comes religious faith. Studies showed over and over that the most happy people are those who have strong personal relationships ... The least happy people are those who have unhappy relationships regardless of how young, wealthy, successful, respected publicly.

Former President Jimmy Carter has written a book of poetry, *Always A Reckoning*. One of the poems is "Some Things I Love" — his personal definition of happiness — his inventory, which begins and ends with relationships.

"Your enchantment in a lonely wood,
The fight and color of a rainbow trout,
My in-basket empty and a good new book,
Binoculars fixed on a strange new bird,
A dovetail joint without a gap,
Grandchildren coming in our front door,
The same ones leaving in a day or two,
And life, till what rhymes best with breath,
Takes me from all the things I share with you."

Jesus said — How happy are you when you are poor, hungry, weeping, rejected. And what he meant is that poor, hungry, weeping and rejected force the issue of happiness to go where it must go — to your center, your spirit, your soul.

What he meant is that so long as we believe that our happiness depends on being wealthy, satisfied, young, strong, attractive, having non-stop fun, ... we will ultimately be unhappy ...

Happy are the poor?

Happy are those who know that ultimately we own nothing which we cannot give away or do without.

Happy are those who know that we are not forever young and strong and who, therefore, do not have to spend the best years of their lives alternately pretending they are something they are not and grieving daily — every time they look in the mirror — over what they have become.

Happy are those who know that food, friends, and laughter are fun during the party and a short while after, but the world goes on, and even if you can party every night — the issue of personal happiness remains illusive ...

Happy are those who are hungry for truth and goodness and beauty and who, therefore, are never satisfied and smug but always open, always humble, always hungry.

And happy are those who know that relationships matter most, regardless of what else is going on in life and that the relationship that matters most of all is the one He, Jesus Christ, came to proclaim, and teach, and demonstrate and facilitate: our ultimate relationship, relationship with God.

How happy are you when he — the improbable rabbi — becomes your Lord. That is what these revolutionary little statements are about. Recentering, refocusing, reorganizing your life on the basis of his agenda. It's what being a Christian means. It's at the heart of our tradition ... Happy are those who know God — through the law, Psalm 1 declares ... Happy are those who trust in the Lord, Jeremiah wrote ... those whose trust is in the Lord.

After working on this sermon, I have a new project ... a new file. I'm calling it my VHP File. We know what VIP means. We keep a private mental file of those who are, for us, "Very Important Persons." My new file is VHP, "Very Happy People." It isn't very big yet. I'm still trying to pin down the happiness part. But let me tell you about the first person to go into it.

Dave Hardin is his name. He died a little more than a year ago, and the reason I put him in is that just a few weeks before he died he wrote a letter about happiness.

Dave Hardin was a successful businessman. He started his own market research firm which became enormously successful. He lost his wife to illness, sold his company, attended seminary for a while, and then started to give his life away ... to Opportunity International, a private foundation that funds start-up businesses in Third World nations. And he ended up as President and CEO of the Chicago Sunday Evening Club — and helped some of us rescue and

preserve the Greater Chicago Broadcast Ministries. He was an Episcopalian, but loved this Church and was a regular worshipper at 8:30 in the north balcony.

And then — happily remarried, giving so much to so many, he came down with a painful, relentless cancer of the spine. He did everything he was supposed to, including surgery, chemotherapy, radiation therapy. He was dying and he knew it, and he told a few of us, and kept on going to the office, administering the programs and enterprises he loved.

When the end was near he wrote this letter - and it appeared in the Sunday Evening Club Newsletter. He called it "Be grateful. Be happy."

What is your goal in life? Dave asked. For most of us, he said, it's simple - to be happy.

He confessed that he had been taught to seek happiness by achieving success and prestige. He didn't say it, but he had plenty of both.

Sometimes, he said, it takes a lifetime to learn how wrong that is.

He cited Porgy's song in "Porgy and Bess, "I got plenty of nothin."

Lame and impoverished, Porgy knows the source of true happiness.

The world God created;
The simple things in life;
Relationships with loved ones.

Happiness, Dave concluded, is a matter of focusing on that, instead of on what one doesn't have — and I'm sure he meant, in his case, health and much time left.

Happiness, Dave Hardin wrote, is what you experience when you identify the gifts you have been given and thank God for them.

"God loves you" he wrote to all his friends. "You really matter. Be grateful for that! Be happy. God bless you."

He's in my personal VHP file.

It's a matter finally of relationships. Finally a matter, not of all you have or own: not a matter of your position: what you can do or even the esteem others have for you. It is deeper and more important and more profound than that. It is a matter of your relationships with those God has given you to love — those with whom you are privileged to share life. Your beloveds.

And it is finally a matter of the relationship which is at the center, the heart of it all ... a relationship you may have ignored, or run away from, or simply not known or thought about ... It is finally a matter between you and God: the God who addresses you in Jesus Christ. The God who loves you. The God who wants your faith and trust and commitment. The God who wants for you, more than anything else, blessedness — happiness.

Thanks be to God.